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## OBSTACLES TO BUSINESS METHODS IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

GENERALLY speaking, we have bad city government in America, and we agree that business methods should prevail in its administration. The question then arises, what obstacles stand in the way of applying business methods to our municipal affairs. Briefly stated, the answer is: 1. American commercialism; 2. The spirit of partisanship; 3. The misplacement of emphasis since the outbreak of the Civil War; 4. An erroneous political perspective; 5. Executive legislation; 6. Want of local autonomy.

I. Under the head of commercialism, a number of influences of various kinds have to be considered.

1. Commercialism, or undue absorption in private business or an undue desire to accumulate wealth, has been the distinguishing characteristic of the average American during the present century, and especially since the Civil War. It is the one feature more frequently referred to and more generally commented upon by foreign observers than any other. It is no doubt true that the rapid development of our country and its unparalleled growth in wealth and numbers have absorbed the energies of our people; and now that we have passed the stage of expansion, and entered another, which should be one of cultivation, we seem unable to leave off the habit formed largely under the spur of necessity, and which was undoubtedly essential to recovery from the evil effects of internal dissension.

Commercialism has led to the absorption of the best business talent in every community in private business affairs, mainly because the legitimate rewards are larger, and because there is a permanency of tenure not to be found in public affairs.

The returns in mercantile, manufacturing, and professional pursuits have been much larger than the honest returns to those holding equally responsible official positions in our cities. I admit there is a certain honor attached to public office; and that there should be a certain amount of self-sacrifice for the public welfare; but we may not always be able to afford such honors or make such sacrifices. So long as the returns from the same amount of application in public business are so disproportionate to those received from private business, we shall find the latter absorbing the best administrative and executive talent to the manifest detriment of the former.

Then, again, a young man starting out in private business knows that, with diligent attention to details and close application, he will be enabled to improve his position and his emoluments. The results of his efforts will be in a direct ratio to the energy expended. Let the same young man enter the public service and his tenure of office will not depend on capacity or application; but, in nine cases out of ten, upon his usefulness to a political leader or organization. When this ends, his tenure ends. He can retain his place only by subserviency—a course that must always prove distasteful to the conscientious young man. Is it any wonder, therefore, that private affairs irresistibly attract young men? Is it any wonder that we find the public service in many cities filled with men who cannot make a livelihood elsewhere, and who resort to public patronage when all other resources fail? Commercialism robs the public services of its best men and leaves it almost bare; a wrong political system steps in and deprives what little there is left of its value.

2. Commercialism leads not only to the absorption of business talent in private affairs, but also to the diversion of the constructive talents of the

community into the same channels. There is no denying the great constructive abilities of the Anglo-Saxon. In former times they were utilized in building up the state and nation and perfecting great governmental schemes; but of late years there has been little if any progress along governmental lines at all in keeping with the immense strides we have taken along commercial and manufacturing lines. The creation of great factories and great trusts and business concerns; the inventiveness displayed in mechanical and electrical trades seem to have exhausted the constructive genius of the country. Here the question of returns comes in again. The same amount of skill and ability displayed in public affairs will not bring a tithe of the return that an equal amount exerted in private business would. I am not now taking into consideration anything but legitimate returns, for the dishonest men can perhaps make more out of public office than in private business. I am considering only the honest rewards to be had in both services. As a result of this tendency, we have the rather curious condition of great advance in business, an advance that has placed us at the head of the commercial world; while in municipal methods we are a generation or so behind in our development.

3. Another result of commercialism is seen in the indifference of the average voter, who is generally so wrapped up in his business that he forgets to discharge his duties as a citizen. He reasons that the amount of time he would devote to political affairs if expended in private business will yield a return very much larger than the increased tax he will be subjected to by permitting incompetent men to run the city. In other words, he will pay higher taxes rather than devote good and valuable time to public business. It may be said in passing, however, that if every citizen would give but five hours a year to the consideration of public business; very great changes in present methods could be inaugurated. This would allow two hours (a generous allowance) for attendance on two primary and two general elections, and three hours for general conference, consideration, and attendance on one or two meetings.

4. Inasmuch as most if not all of our state and national taxation has been indirect, insignificant as compared with European taxes, due to the fact that we have no immense armies or navies or expensive royal families to support, voters have not as yet felt the full effect of high municipal taxation and extravagant and inefficient local government. The fact is that, after all that can be said against bad city government, the cost of maintaining it (at least from the financial view point) is comparatively small and bears but indirectly upon the average citizen. The business man is accustomed to sacrifice a small benefit in one direction to earn a larger one in another; and he carries this principle into his consideration of public affairs. He will agree that we have bad government and should have better; but he sacrifices the benefit that would accrue to him in this direction to gain a larger one in his private affairs.

5. The spirit of commercialism has also had another effect, of a somewhat different character, however, from those mentioned. Many who devote their brains and energies to the consummation of great undertakings have found that it is good business to conciliate and control the governing powers. Constantly seeking franchises and privileges, they have realized that a better bargain can be made when all the parties to it are of one opinion and on one side. Their policy has therefore been to make the interest of the granting powers identical with their own by taking them "in on the ground

floor," or by paying them outright for favorable votes and influence. This has been very much more profitable than paying to the city the true value of such privileges and franchises.

II. Next to commercialism, the greatest obstacle is partisanship, or the prostitution of public office and public measures to party success. A party, as a means to an end, is all right and proper, but as an end in itself it is all wrong; and yet in the United States we have made party and party success the end to be attained. To accomplish this we have utilized the offices. They have served, not to promote the comfort, happiness, and well-being of the people primarily, but to pay off party debts and to strengthen the party's working force.

III. During the Civil War, and for many years after, the rallying cry in our politics was "Measures, not men!" a cry still heard and still effective. So grave were the issues before the public during and immediately after the war, that they fell in with the idea that measures were everything, and men of but subordinate importance. Always a mistaken and unwise policy, it is still more so now, when the issues are mainly business ones.

The conditions of American political life we have been discussing apply with considerable if not equal force to State and national, as well as to municipal, politics. Those which we shall refer to hereafter apply only to municipal affairs.

IV. For sundry reasons which need not be referred to in the present connection the American people have formed an erroneous conception of the importance and extent of municipal government. They have come to regard it as of subordinate importance and have awarded first place in their interest and attention to national and State issues. As a general rule, we find more space accorded to news concerning the latter than the former in the newspaper; and the average reader turns first to State and national news, leaving to the last, and more frequently entirely overlooking, the doings of municipal officers and bodies. The same tendency is to be seen in the interest manifested in elections. At the quadrennial presidential elections the greatest excitement prevails; the issues are widely and earnestly discussed and the merits of candidates canvassed. The vote polled is larger than at other elections and many vote only at such elections. Gubernatorial campaigns arouse but little less interest and bring out but a slightly smaller vote. When we come to municipal elections, however, the vote falls off to a marked degree, and apathy prevails, unless some issue accidentally introduced creates a temporary interest; or the election can be construed to have an important bearing on national or State elections.

V. Most if not all of our American cities fail to endow their executive officers with sufficient power to secure a well-rounded, continuous business-like conduct of municipal affairs. They permit the local legislatures to interfere to too great an extent in the conduct of purely executive business, with the result of preventing the officers in charge carrying out any plan involving careful preparation and slow execution.

VI. Want of local autonomy is simply the operation on a large scale of the obstacle just mentioned. Not only have we erred in our general plan of municipal government by modelling it to too great an extent on our federal government, with elaborate checks and balances, a bicameral system, and so on, but also in permitting our State legislature to have too much to say as to municipal affairs.

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